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ABSTRACT

The problem of involving parents in programs of educational change is discussed. It is noted that comprehensive programs of parent involvement in public education will cut across social-racial-economic lines in the community. Precautions to be remembered by those engaged in school-community endeavors are given: (1) "Reality" for the individual is determined by what his reference group accepts as reality; (2) The significance of the informal ties between an individual and his peers also means that even first-hand experience does not automatically create correct knowledge; (3) Programs designed to bring about a change in behavior must lead to the active involvement of individuals in the dialogue concerning the planning and execution of these programs; and (4) This crucial element of personal involvement is reflected in such areas as voluntary attendance, informality of meetings, and freedom of expression in voicing grievances. It is concluded that to the extent that educators can work with, through, and for new combinations of federal and state government funds, foundation assistance, and local parent groups, they may be able to accomplish something of lasting benefit for modern society through the development of a school system more attuned to the needs of this country. (Author/CK)

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INVOLVING PARENTS IN PROGRAMS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

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Background

In his latest work, Archibald MacLeish pays tribute to Jane Addams by stating: "Hull House was not a house: it was an action."[1] It is significant that MacLeish refers to a notable achievement in the field of social service, for public schools today are caught up in a demand for social action. Various forces in the United States, including the federal government, are insisting that educational institutions act as agents of social and economic reform. Nor is this demand a new phenomenon. Jane Addams herself questioned whether education is an adequate substitute for direct political action in the alleviation of poverty.[2]

Whether or not schools should be expected to fulfill the role cited above, however, has long been a hotly controversial issue. For example, the requirements of devising a theoretical base and the operational procedures essential to successful implementation of current programs of compensatory education represent a perplexing situation for school personnel. True, federal projects such as Head

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[1]MacLeish, Archibald. A Continuing Journey (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), p. 23.

[2]Actually, she criticized it as being "a fine Victorian example of rose water for the plague." Jane Addams, My Friend, Julia Lathrop (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935), p. 57.

Start and Follow Through have provided additional funds for satisfying new demands. But many of the concomitant tasks--for example, involving parents in the education of their children are fraught with numerous difficulties.

The Problem

For many years, the Parent and Teacher Association was the only organization through which parents were involved in school issues. Numerous accounts have described the limited impact of this organization. Critics point to the relatively narrow base of active membership as a major factor in negating the P. T. A. model as an effective agent of change. But there are other problems, too. Hence, simply extending the base of membership of the P. T. A. would only improve one organization and not necessarily solve the problem of involving parents in programs of educational change.

Effective Communication--Theory

It is important to note that comprehensive programs of parent involvement in public education will cut across social-racial-economic lines in the community. Conflicts over school management in New York City, disputes in many communities concerning the administration of Head Start summer programs, the animosities displayed in proposals for school integration, all illustrate the problems created by the interrelationship between educational issues and social problems. One of the most basic of these problems is how to encourage effective communication among the people involved.

Although considerable research on the social psychology of communication has taken place in the past decade, the complexity of this field was spotlighted over a generation ago in the work of Kurt Lewin.[3] Several points of caution cited by Lewin are worthy of careful study by those engaged in school-community endeavors.

1. "Reality" for the individual is, to a high degree, determined by what his reference group accepts as reality. That is, the recipient of a mass-communicated message is seldom reached directly; instead, his understanding of the message is heavily influenced by the close, informal groupings to which he also belongs.

2. The significance of these informal ties also means that even first-hand experience does not automatically create correct knowledge. Moreover, intellectual understanding of an issue does not necessarily result in changes in attitudes. The resistance of highly-educated suburban dwellers to plans for open housing or school integration is one manifestation of this difference between intellectual understanding and actual changes in attitudes.

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[3]Lewin, Kurt. "Conduct, Knowledge, and Acceptance of New Values," Resolving Social Conflicts (New York: Harper Bros., 1948). Reprint: Charles E. Merrill, Inc., 1965.

3. Programs designed to bring about a change in behavior must lead to the active involvement of individuals in the dialogue concerning the planning and execution of these programs.
4. This crucial element of personal involvement is reflected in such areas as voluntary attendance, informality of meetings, freedom of expression in voicing grievances, the presence of an atmosphere of emotional security, and avoidance of pressure.

Effective Communication--Operational Procedures

The consequences of poor communication are portrayed in the following remarks. They initially appeared in the text of a speech given by Dan W. Dodson, Director, Center for Human Relations and Community Studies, New York University, under the heading, "The Crisis in School-Community Relations."[4]

> As the community comes into conflict over goals of education, the leadership of the schools become insecure and rigid. This exacerbates the problems. Hence in minority neighborhoods it is extremely difficult to create the climate between school and community which makes for a viable educational program. For instance, as the community becomes segregated and the whites withdraw their pupils, the minority community begins to suspect that if prejudice is so great that whites will not go to school with them, it is also so great that white teachers really do not like them either, and are there to teach only because it is a fat job. They become suspicious of the teachers, and frequently hostile toward them.

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[4]Five Crises of Urban Education. Paper delivered before the closed session hearing of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, Washington, D. C.; November 2, 1967.

> Unless school-community relations can be improved so teachers believe they have the support of the community in dealing with children, it is going to be impossible for them to do the job required of them. Unless the community believes the teachers are genuinely interested in their children and accepting of them they are not going to give that support. Most school leadership is unwilling to engage in the type of dialogue necessary to develop that understanding.

Current attempts to establish meaningful discussions between schools and the parents of all the children are described on the following pages. These accounts were extracted from sources prepared by personnel active in the field of school-community relations.[5] Common to all of the approaches cited is a reliance on techniques which reflect Lewin's principles in action.

New Orleans, Louisiana--The program described in Project Kindergarten, 1965-66 by the Division of Instruction of the New Orleans Public Schools stresses the importance of beginning with problems of immediate concern to adults. Excerpts from the New Orleans publication follow.

> Recognizing that optimal results could be achieved only if home and school reinforced each other's efforts, Project Pre-Kindergarten focused attention on actively involving parents. Their ideas, inspiration, service, and support were solicited.
>
> Parents participated in a family-education program. They were invited to bi-monthly meetings in each center. Sometimes these were large-group meetings to hear a

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[5]Readers may be confused by the apparent dissimilarity of such terms as "School-Community Agents," "Detached Workers," "Integration Specialists," etc. While certain phases of their job performances will differ, individuals in these positions serve as specialists in the realm of fostering worthwhile school and community interaction.

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lecture, view a film or witness a demonstration. More often, these were "kaffee klatches" with small groups, to talk informally of the work and aims of the classroom.

Study groups were planned around the problems of making a home and rearing children. Discussions and workshops were devoted to family needs, such as budget, homemaking tips, and information on existing legal and social service facilities; aspects of child growth and development, such as the early stages in child development, child rearing, and discipline; physical needs, such as nutrition, hygiene, and the identification, prevention, and treatment of childhood diseases; and various phases of the educational program, such as school goals, story-telling techniques, and games and finger plays for carry-over experiences in the home.

Resource persons and discussion leaders included project and school system personnel and volunteers from the community. Among these were physicians, nutritionists, and college professors. In all meetings, an effort was made to avoid professional pedaguese and to encourage an easy, informal interchange of ideas. Leaders were impressed with the participants' eager responses and receptiveness to ideas, which avid interest is contrary to the charges of indifference traditionally leveled against this class of parents.

Teachers held frequent conferences with parents. Some were scheduled meetings; others were informal conversations during the dinner hour or when the parents brought or called for their children. Parents were invited to participate in classroom activities, to assist with the preparation of materials, and to accompany youngsters on field trips. Because most classes were conducted in the late afternoon, the majority of field trips were held on Saturday, thus permitting the attendance of working parents. Such participation enabled them to become familiar with and adopt the teacher's approaches and techniques.

In addition to home visits by the nurses and social worker, teachers visited the home of each pupil on at least two occasions. These interviews afforded opportunities for furthering mutual understanding of the child and for discussing appropriate home and school experiences.

Parents were asked to make suggestions and recommendations for improving the program. In future projects, they will be invited to serve on planning and advisory committees.

Oakland, California--A somewhat negative support for the New Orleans emphasis on individual involvement in issues of immediate concern comes from a report on the Ford Foundation Great Cities School Improvement Program in Oakland, California. Calling attention to one of the projects which experienced little success, the report concludes:

> On the whole this project was not successful because very few neighborhood organizations developed. Those organizations which were successful tended to direct their activities toward goals which they could realize in the immediate future. Projects in which neighborhood residents built a playground, undertook trash collections, or pressured the authorities to improve street lighting were successful. Projects designed to call mass meetings on problems of unemployment, race relations, and urban renewal rarely turned out more than a handful of people.[6]

Las Cruces, New Mexico--School District No. 2, Las Cruces, acts as the legal agent for Title III, Public Law 89-10, project: "A Sustained Primary Program for Bilingual Students." In this program cooperation of the home is sought in a variety of ways. A school-home coordinator conversant in both English and Spanish is a vital component of the project. Teachers and administrators from the schools go to the homes to personally invite parents to visit their children's classrooms. Study of the Spanish culture and its influence in the United States is an integral part of the daily school program.

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[6] Social Intervention and Research in A Gray City Area: Oakland, California. presented to AERA, February, 1966. (Mimeo).

The Las Cruces approach is one more illustration of the close cooperation often found between parents and the schools when young children are involved. However, it is critically important to sustain this relationship as students move up into the secondary levels. The role of specialized personnel in welding teachers, administrators, and parents into a working team for continuous support of student effort is described below.

> The parents of the incoming youngsters often had to be encouraged to become part of the new school and to see it as their own. They were sometimes coached in the kinds of social skills that they needed to be able to deal effectively with school personnel. School officials sometimes asked team members to attend and participate in meetings of parent groups concerned with future desegregation as well. Thus, the integration specialists assisted in establishing and maintaining communication and liaison between the school system and parents. The importance and success of this function was perhaps best illustrated at protest meetings where it often seemed clear that the integration specialists were respected and trusted by parents and other protesters as well as by school personnel being protested against.

> One factor incidental to the integration program, its special Administrative demands, could have provided a major irritant to already overworked school personnel had not the team members been available to carry much of this load. For example, integration specialists often handled reassignment problems for youngsters who seemed unable to adjust in their new schools or who needed assignments to special classes, they arranged for the transmittal of necessary records between schools, they followed up cases of absence (from school or from the bus), forgotten lunches, and the like. Further, the specialists served as a link between the school and incoming youngsters who were lost and floundering in a new setting and needed help in coping with it. In this sense, the integration specialist may be seen as the advocate of the youngster who is unable, either directly or through his parents, to deal with his new school.

Despite wide personality differences, the three team members assigned to individual schools utilized similar strategies in developing, communicating, and implementing essentially similar roles

> All had agreed in advance that their constituencies would be the schools in which they worked rather than the newly desegregated youngsters alone. This reflected the conviction that the school as an institution, rather than individual students, was the primary client as well as the relatively small number of youngsters who were desegregated. Consultative work with faculty rather than direct service to students was emphasized whenever possible.[7]

Implications for the Future

Head Start and Follow Through programs underscore the idea that schools should be the coordinating agency through which various forms of social services are made available to children and their families. In order to discharge this responsibility a number of changes in financing as well as organizational and instructional practices will be required. Government funds provide a partial answer to the question of additional finances. But the Head Start guidelines which directed schools to develop programs for parents, i.e., classes in sewing, nutrition, literacy, job training--involved educators with factions the schools had not customarily dealt with in the past.

An outstanding illustration of the benefits accruing from a program whereby schools are committed to a joint endeavor with individuals and the community is found in Flint, Michigan. Excerpts taken from a recent address by Mr. Fred Totten, director of the Mott Foundation Program in Flint, pinpoint certain noteworthy features of the community school approach.

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[7]School Desegregation & Integration: Lessons From a Medium-Sized Northern City, Jerome Beker, Syracuse University Youth Development Center, Syracuse, New York. (Mimeo).

Reading is basic to upward mobility and to successful life. A large percentage of people in poverty cannot read. They cannot read instructions given by an employer. They cannot look up a name or a number in a telephone directory nor can they read the want ads in a newspaper.

The parents of the children in one school were given a series of lessons on how to help their children with reading and a set of rules and practices to follow for the reading program at home. Nothing was done with the parents of the children in the other school.

Children in the first group gained 5.4 months in reading level in a 5 month period, while those who had no help from their parents gained only 2.7 months.

In a recent year the number of crimes committed by juveniles in the United States increased by 17 per cent. During the same year there was a 12 per cent decrease in juvenile offenses in Flint.

It was during the first two-year period that the counseling team approach was used as a pilot program in one of the Flint high schools that the number of juvenile offenses in the school district decreased by 32 per cent.

During a 10-year period the per cent of registered voters who actually voted in the 10 most socially and economically depressed areas of the city increased from 66.2 per cent to 81.8 per cent. One district changed the voting record from 17 per cent to 72 per cent in the 10-year period.

During the last 20 years every school millage has been approved by a substantial majority. This is a rather rare circumstance.

Mr. Totten adds that a true community school of the future will resemble a human development laboratory. In his words, this laboratory will become a place where

Expectant parents receive instruction in prenatal care and preparation for parenthood.
Babies receive clinical examinations and medical care.
Preschool children get ready for kindergarten experience.

Children and youth use their free time for creative expression in such areas as science, reading, music, and crafts.

School dropouts are reclaimed as a part of society.

Mothers learn how to purchase, prepare, and conserve food and how to construct, launder, and maintain clothing.

Persons displaced by automation retrain and learn new salable skills.

Adults learn basic academic skills including reading and writing.

Older citizens become aware that they are still a useful part of society.

Summary

Greater participation by community elements in the actual operation of schools, as in P.S. 201 in New York City where neighborhood parents are hiring teachers and administrators and making policy decisions, may be frightening to large numbers of educators; but it can also represent the nucleus of a solution to the problem of inferior education. In this sense, the rural slums of Appalachia confront many of the same sources of difficulty that are present in metropolitan areas. Years of neglect and indifference to issues of public schooling have characterized the reactions of groups living in the ghettos and in the impoverished rural regions; likewise, formal education has done little to reach out to directly involve these same people.

To the extent that educators can work with, through, and for new combinations of federal and state government funds, foundation assistance, and local parent groups, they may be able to accomplish something of lasting benefit for modern society. Schools will have to assume the positive attitude of going to the community by getting parents involved in the educative process rather than the negative one of simply reacting to forces developing

outside the educational system. This surely is one of the major lessons to be drawn from the Flint experience.

It is equally true that parent involvement requires a thorough appraisal of the dangers and pitfalls that lie ahead. However, to those who can conceive and develop quality programs embodying this principle, the future holds out the promise of operating a school system more attuned to the needs of this country.